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ON-THE-RECORD BRIEFING

**Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Melanne Verveer and
International Women of Courage Awardees**

**March 11, 2010
Washington, D.C.**

MR. DUGUID: Good morning, and welcome to the State Department. March 8th was International Women's Day, and it was a global holiday celebrating the economic, political, and social achievements of women of the past, of the present, and of the future. I would like to introduce to you today Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Melanne Verveer, who will brief you on the events this week associated with International Women's Day, including the International Women of Courage Awards and Secretary Clinton's Friday, March 12th speech to the United Nations.

Joining Ambassador Verveer today are two International Women of Courage Award winners, Jestina Mukoko and Ann Njogu, who is from Kenya. And Jestina is from Zimbabwe.

Ambassador Verveer.

AMBASSADOR VERVEER: Thank you so much. Good morning, everybody. As you heard, we have been marking International Women's Day here as an event for the week. And yesterday, as I'm sure many of you know, the Secretary and the First Lady of the United States participated in the presentation of the International Women of Courage Awards, which is the only award that the Department gives out to courageous women leaders working to advance human rights around the globe. We have two of those women this morning with us, and I know you'll be interested in hearing from them and the extraordinary work that they do in their countries and how really representative they are, in many ways, of the kind of efforts that go on around the world.

It is also entirely fitting that we do this briefing just minutes now, I guess, before the rollout of the Human Rights Report. As you may know, some 15 years ago this year, when she was First Lady of the United States, Secretary Clinton delivered one of the historic speeches at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women that took place in Beijing. And at that conference, she struck a chord around the world with her statement that women's rights are human rights, and human rights are women's rights, not something separate from human rights, not a category that is somehow not completely inclusive, but inclusive in human rights. And as you will hear later this morning, issues that touch on – in a significant way – on rights specifically undermined, abridged, constricted in some way to women, will be and are a significant part of the Human Rights Report and I'm sure will be discussed in that context.

When she issued that memorable statement, she walked through a litany of abuses that women endure around the world, from child marriage to girl feticide and infanticide just because they're girls – and

there's a cover story in *The Economist* this week about that – honor crimes, domestic violence, rape as a tool of war, so horribly illustrated today in what's going on in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

And as Nick Kristof has said in his bestselling book, *Half the Sky*, that in many ways the 19th century was about ridding our world of slavery and dealing with that horrible condition; in the 20th century, we were all focusing on the struggle with totalitarianism. It is time to really look at this major challenge we have to confront in this 21st century, which is gender equality. And it is something that, obviously, when one looks at the range – and in many ways, we are seeing a pandemic of violence against women. This is illustrative of the lack of worth, the low status of women, the view of women still, in too many places, that clearly needs to be addressed.

So with an eye on this historic observance, the Secretary will be at the United Nations tomorrow afternoon as the Commission on the Status of Women, which has been meeting for the last week and a half, closes its marking not just of this anniversary but where we are headed on the realization of the Millennium Development Goals, which are strictly tied in many ways to the Beijing Platform for Action that over 180 countries endorsed some 15 years ago. And that Platform for Action was simply the agenda that is yet unfinished, focusing on women's access to education, health, full rights to participate in the economic and political life of their countries, to be free from violence. So she will have some closing remarks in her address that really focus on how we need to go forward and the work that is still ahead of us to do.

So yesterday, we had the official awards. Today, we have the release of the Human Rights Report. Tomorrow, she will be at the United Nations. And this is really part of a ongoing effort here at the Department to integrate these issues in the full range of the activities that we focus on in terms of our relationships with the world and the position of our country, the work that we do with multilateral institutions, with other countries, and ongoing work with people in the field like the two women I want to introduce to you this morning.

One is Ann Njogu, who is from Kenya. She has suffered greatly for the position she has taken in fighting corruption, in dealing with a range of challenges in that country, and the upsurge also in sexual and gender-based violence that is taking place there.

She's been very active in the effort on constitutional reform, and as is so typical of so many of Women of Courage and activists around the world, many of the issues they deal with has to do with the status of women and the challenges to women, but they are also women who are engaged on the range of issues that their countries and their societies are confronting.

We also have with us Jestina Mukoko from Zimbabwe. She, too, has endured a great deal. She was horribly abused and took her case all the way to the supreme court, which ruled in her favor, and has, in many ways, been an inspiration in her country to the fact that justice can be done and she continues to work on a range of issues there.

So I would like to introduce them to you, each of them to make a brief statement. And then we can, together, take any questions that you would like to raise. So –

MS. NJOGU: Thank you very much, Ambassador Verveer. As she said, my name's Ann Njogu. I work with the Center for Rights, Education, and Awareness, as well as the Africa Community Development Media, which are civil society organizations based in Kenya. As a human rights organization, our organization deals with quite a number of wide-ranging issues of women from gender-based violence to questions of sexual violence to issues of bride price because we know that it's a major contributor to the kind of gender-based violence that we find women experiencing. It's also an organization that goes on to act on women's reproductive health rights. As you very well know that in Kenya we have extremely high maternal mortality rates. It's also an organization that goes to the core of seeking to have these rights enshrined in the constitution, because we realize that if the rights are enshrined in the supreme law of the land, which is the constitution, then it will be much easier for the women to be able to access these rights.

We also realize that as an organization that has been undertaking a lot of community awareness to change the mindsets and to have paradigm shifts about a very – a society that looks at gender-based violence as a way of life, sometimes as a way of demonstrating love. We realize that we have to do massive community awareness, enhance the work that we do with community radio. We work with community radio because the mainstream media is in the hands of a small clique of the elite and, therefore, programs they're not commercialized and the programs are – it's difficult to have meaningful programs that work on the issues of development.

As an organization that is working on many of these human rights issues, it means that many times we'll be at the forefront of fighting so many of the societal issues, including impunity. And our organization did document the sexual and gender-based violence that occurred during the time our country had a crisis following the post-election – the presidential elections of 2007 and thereafter the violence that took place.

Women indeed paid the highest price. It is the women who today are carrying babies from the gang rapes that they experienced during that crisis when their bodies were used as battlegrounds, as weapons and tools of war for warring communities. It is the women who are now HIV positive from the gang rapes and the various atrocities that they came across during that kind of a crisis. It's also the women who have to bear the various other challenges, including poverty. And if – when you go to the IDP camps, it's the women who are the majority therein.

It is a society that is wrought with huge inequalities. We have 70 percent of the country's resources in the hands of less than 10 percent, and the last 10 percent do not own even one percent of the country's resources. It's a country where 47 percent live below the poverty line. But it is a country where 70 percent of that 47 percent are the women, and you can imagine that this is regardless of the fact that women provide about 70 percent of the labor in the agricultural sector, which is a key sector in our economy, but own less than five percent of the country's land. With this kind of environment it becomes extremely difficult for the women to realize and access their full and rightful opportunities, including full rights.

Human rights defenders also have come to pay great sacrifices due to the havoc that is caused by the kind of environment that we live in. And many times some of us have been battered by the police – very, very brutalized, some have lost their lives, shot in cold blood by the police, others are living in exile. In many instances, we find that the democratic space to express our freedoms and rights has become extremely shrunk and we realize that then it becomes extremely difficult. We are in a situation where we are trying to have a healing process so that the country does not go back to the crisis that we had in the last general

election. Those are some of the challenges that we face. And above them, of course, corruption that is caused by the impunity.

Kenya has been trying to get a reform process underway. For the last 20 years, we've been trying to reform our major institutions, including having a new constitution or dispensation. But again, this has been a work in progress for the last 20 years and this is one of the areas that we work with as we – as human rights defenders because we know that a new constitution or dispensation would also bring in a great atmosphere for all the citizens to enjoy their rights and freedoms.

That is what I would like to say, and I know I'll take quite a number of questions from you during questions time. Thank you.

MS. MUKOKO: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Jestina Mukoko and I hail from Zimbabwe, and I'm at the helm of the Zimbabwe Peace Project, which is an organization that monitors and documents violations of human rights that are politically motivated. My organization was founded in the year 2000 as a result of the heightening political violence at the time. And what we do is that we sort of monitor the climate in terms of political violence.

And at the moment, while the country is in an inclusive government that has been arrived at through the Global Political Agreement, as human rights defenders, we are still concerned about the human rights abuses that we are still recording in the country. The Global Political Agreement itself confirms that Zimbabwe is a victim of political violence, in particular when we face events like elections. And we are likely to be going through a constitutional referendum and an election immediately afterwards, and our fears rise as a result of that because we know that, usually, our elections have been quite violent.

And in those situations, our concern is mainly around the welfare of women, because they are the ones who are mostly affected. In most cases, women are unable to flee violence. Their husbands might be able to flee violence, but they remain on the homestead with the children. And in most cases, like Ann has said, they suffer gang rapes and some of them are now holding children whose fathers they do not know.

And at the moment, like I've said, that we are going to go through a constitutional referendum. There is a constitution-making process in Zimbabwe. In the year 2000, we went to a referendum and the citizens voted against the constitution that the government had initiated. But at the moment, we are sort of getting into this work in terms of the constitution-making process. But we are concerned that probably the citizens might not be able to express their views freely, because we are getting reports from, in particular, the rural areas where people are being threatened with unspecified action if they do not support a particular draft which is the Kariba draft. And that is a bit of a concern to us because then it means that people are not going to be able to say out their views freely, because we would want to come up with a constitution that is going to sort of protect and enshrine the rights of all, including the rights of women.

And I think at this stage, at this particular time in Zimbabwe, we are also concerned about the welfare of human rights defenders whose lives are at risk. A lot of the human rights defenders have been threatened by unknown people, and we do not take those threats lightly. In particular, for myself, because I am a survivor of state-sponsored violence, I know what can happen if they do get to you. And we are worried that this is a tactic that is meant to intimidate and harass human rights defenders so that they are unable to do their work, in particular, around conscientizing communities to speak out in terms of what they would

want to see in the constitution. And that is a bit of a concern to us, and we would really want the authorities to realize that it is not in the interest of Zimbabwean citizens for people to be threatened in the manner that they are being threatened.

As an organization that monitors and documents violations of human rights, we are demanding accountability and an end to impunity. And I think earlier on, I have said that the Global Political Agreement confirms that political violence has been a big problem in the country. And there are efforts to bring some national healing, reconciliation, and integration. There is an organ on national healing that has been established, which is led by ministers from the three political parties that are in the inclusive government.

What we think as human rights defenders is that it is essential that the views of the Zimbabwean citizens are considered in terms of coming up with a mechanism that works for Zimbabwe. We know in South Africa, they went through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And in Rwanda and other countries, they used local-based kind of institutions. In Rwanda, they used the gacaca courts.

And I think Zimbabweans need to also be given an opportunity to decide on how they would want this national healing process to be done. And I think it is essential for those who are in the organ on national healing to listen to the views of the Zimbabweans, because I think that will be a step in the right direction in terms of healing the wounds of the victims and also helping the perpetrators of violence rehabilitate from where they are.

And like Ambassador Verveer has already said, that justice is also another recourse that citizens of Zimbabwe can use. It is a mammoth task. It is quite trying to go through the courts. I know that when I started going through the courts, it was a battle, because orders were flouted left, right and center. But when we eventually challenged and the case was referred to the constitutional court, they ruled in my favor, and they confirmed that my rights had been violated.

And as a human rights defender, I am hoping that the Zimbabwean Government will learn from that mistake, that it is not proper for a citizen to be abducted, tortured, and kept incommunicado for weeks on end without being tried. I think I will stop there and then we will engage in questions.

MR. DUGUID: Thank you. As we identify questioners, please identify yourselves and your news organization, and to whom you are directing your question.

Please, Mr. Goyal.

QUESTION: Thank you, Raghubir Goyal from *India Globe and Asia Today*. Madam, two questions. One on Burma (inaudible) Madam Secretary. We have for almost 20 years Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest, the famous global woman. Still, the global community is tolerating all the pain and suffering she's going through. So on this day, I'm sure she also has something to say and you also have something to say.

MS. VERVEER: Well, obviously, the situation of Aung San Suu Kyi has been horrific for a long time. It is something that we have raised repeatedly with the regime. We have spoken out about it. I was just at the – in New York last week when I was at the CSW meeting. There was a mock trial that took place that

some Nobel laureates participated in as the panel of judges, if you will. And there was testimony of the horrific violations that continue to this time to the ethnic minorities, particularly the women, who are suffering very, very greatly. These crimes are being documented, and it was an extraordinary amount of testimony that was presented last week.

So it's the continuing house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and everything that that represents, as well as the ongoing persecution and violence that is occurring, particularly to the ethnic minorities and in a very, very significant way to the women.

QUESTION: If I may, one on Africa (inaudible), especially on Kenya. As far as President Obama comes from the same region, especially from Kenya, do you think under the Administration now over a year, anything changed or anything – something new happening in that region of Africa, especially in Kenya, where he comes from?

MR. DUGUID: The President comes from Hawaii, Mr. Goyal.

QUESTION: I mean background. (Laughter.) I mean, going back, like I come from India but I'm in U.S. (Laughter.) That's what I meant. I mean his ancestors or –

MS. NJOGU: Yeah, thank you very much for that question. And like my colleague has said, there hasn't been a doubt about the President's origins. But there is a very exciting new breed of young leaders that's emerging in Kenya, a leadership that will not take a – will not agree to be shortchanged by the leadership, a young leadership that is willing to take over the leadership of the country because they have understood the small clique that has captured the state over the years. It has got no interest of the people at heart. We have a new emerging leadership that is looking for accountable leadership, transparency in leadership, that is looking for transformation, as opposed to sedation through welfare. And this is the exciting new leadership that I see in my generation, and that's going to be bring some great results to the Kenyan people. Thank you.

MR. DUGUID: Next question. Yes.

QUESTION: Rosalind Jordan with Al Jazeera English. This is for both Ms. Mukoko and Ms. Njogu. Do you believe that part of the challenge of establishing a viable human rights regime in both of your countries is difficult because those in power might be able to say this is a particularly Western ideal; this does not respect our cultural, our religious, our ethnic concerns? And if so, how do you respond to those concerns, especially since you've alluded to coming up with a human rights regime that is based on Zimbabwean cultural concerns and historical issues?

MS. MUKOKO: Thank you for that question. And you are right that when those in power look at us as human rights defenders, we are looked at as puppets of the West and people who would want a regime change agenda. But I believe that even if we go to the Holy Book, it speaks about people's rights. And it has nothing to do with the rights being either African or Western, and I think everybody just needs to be treated with respect and dignity. And I suppose this is the reason why we find that there is a contentious issue when we talk about issues of human rights.

QUESTION: Do you also believe – and perhaps, Ms. Njogu, you could add to this – do you believe that this is also a factor of the older generation dying off, perhaps, and younger people who are perhaps much more aware and much more connected to what’s happening in other countries in terms of fighting for human rights, does that empower your generation and those coming after you?

MS. MUKOKO: Maybe just a point before I move from the podium is to say that it doesn’t mean that the older generation in our countries does not know the value of human rights. Some of them actually fought for those human rights. We had a liberation struggle in Zimbabwe and we fought for majority rule, and I believe that was the foundation for the human rights. And I don’t see why we fail to respect human rights today.

MS. NJOGU: Thank you very much. I think, like my colleague has said, human rights cut across boundaries, race, gender, and region, whether geographical and – or any other.

I haven’t come across a woman in the rural part who needs water, and that is the right to access to clean drinking water, who would not share the same as a woman in the west having the same right. I haven’t come across a woman in the east who does not share the right to be democratically governed with a woman in the south knowing very well what would be – what would be in it for them when they have a democratically-run government that is both accountable and transparent to the people.

On the question of whether the older generation is more anti, in Kenya, we say that the country is actually the only divisions that exist are two: those for reform and those against reform. We have old people for reform; we have old people against reform. We have youth for reform, we have youth against reform. We have the church against reform; we have the church and religious organizations for reform. We have these two divisions cutting across. And therefore, we realize that it’s not going to – anybody who will come to divide the country between either young or old, women and men, is not different from the leaders who divided our country across tribal lines. We want a wholesome nation that looks after the rights and interests of all the citizens. And therefore, the rights that we are seeking, the human rights culture that we are seeking, is for the benefit of everybody.

However, in Kenya, the – there is a small elite that has captured the institutions of governance. And this is the – this is a very, very powerful small clique of the political elite who have captured all the institutions of governance. They’ve captured parliament, they’ve captured the judiciary, and they’ve captured all the other democratic institutions of governance. And this is the clique that’s against a new constitution or dispensation because they know that if this comes through, that the leaders would be accountable to the people. And this is what they’re fighting. They have made their wealth exploiting the ignorance of the masses, and this is what they’re fighting.

And that’s why our organization, the Africa Development Community Media, is seeking to establish development media for governments to bring about information right from the ground – controlled by the people, for the people, and run by the people – so that people can make meaningful and rightful decisions about their destiny. Thank you.

AMBASSADOR VERVEER: Could I just very, very briefly address that? Because I think it’s a very important question. There is a tendency in some places today to really look at these rights in terms of, well, they just don’t fit here, our culture is different, this is different, that’s different. We are talking

about universal human rights. Whether a woman lives in a village and is illiterate or whether she is highly educated living in the West, or anywhere else, for that matter, she knows deep inside of her that she is a human being; she is not to be oppressed. These are not rights that can be constricted based on one's religion, one's culture, where one lives. Regardless where she lives, what she believes, what her history is, human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights. We are talking about the dignity that needs to be accorded to her by virtue of the fact that she is a human being.

QUESTION: Ambassador, can I follow up on that? That's a given. But we see in so many – as you said, we see in so many places around the world, in the Middle East, in Latin America, this machismo culture where a woman is inferior. How do you turn the tide beyond saying women's rights? I mean, look in Saudi Arabia. Like, they locked up these children and wouldn't even let them out because they were, you know, these female children and wouldn't even let them out, like they don't even have a right to live. How do you change the mindset, beyond even these brave women that have their programs? It's such an uphill battle. How do you change the mindset that makes a country think in that way?

AMBASSADOR VERVEER: Well, it requires a whole range of activities, most of them at the grassroots level by the kinds of women who have been here today talking about the work they do. It requires education – why investments in education are so critical – rule of law. Practices that are truly criminal practices need to be addressed and prosecuted as such. We need deterrence that the law represents, or the kind of behavior that has been discussed goes on. So there is no one magic potion. It's a range of activities that need to take place. But the commitment has to be there and is something we have to raise every place and every way.

MR. DUGUID: Thank you, Ambassador. We have time for one final question if it's short.

QUESTION: My question is about Saudi Arabia. (Inaudible) of the Gulf Institute. The United States and Saudi Arabia has very strong relationship. Why has the United States failed so far to affect change regarding women? In Saudi Arabia, child marriage is the law and the United States has so far ignored the human right activist – women right activist and instead nominated the sister of the Saudi foreign minister for the Courage Award.

AMBASSADOR VERVEER: Well, the United States speaks out about these things all the time. But in the end, it's what goes on in those countries that needs to happen. As the Secretary said when she was asked about the state of women in Saudi Arabia, she said, "Obviously, the Saudi Arabian women are the ones to speak most vocally to that." Change is taking place. It is taking place, albeit slowly.

But the strongest places where it is taking place are among women in all of these countries. And to the extent that women begin to participate economically, politically, in other ways in civil society to take back their religion where it's been hijacked in some places in the name of oppression that is what is beginning to have an impact. We will do what we can do, but it's what happens to bring change about in those countries by the people in the countries.

MR. DUGUID: Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. That concludes our briefing. And I'd like to thank our speakers, our two Courageous Women award winners and the Ambassador for coming down and sharing their thoughts and words with us today.

AMBASSADOR VERVEER: And this is a preview of the Human Rights Report.

QUESTION: Thank you.

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